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ABSTRACT

Two papers by B. C. Clewell and M. F. Joy and one paper by the Educational Commission of the States discuss the frequently debated questions of parental choice of the public schools their children attend. The first paper, "Montclair--A Model Magnet," describes the experience of the Montclair (New Jersey) school system in using a voluntary magnet school program to desegregate its schools, and it is based on information from an evaluation of the Montclair plan conducted by B. C. Clewell and M. F. Joy. The Montclair experience provides a concrete example of an effective magnet plan. The second paper, "What the Research Says," is drawn from the same evaluation of the Montclair schools. Three types of public school choice programs have generally been studied: (1) regulated voucher systems; (2) alternative schools; and (3) magnet plans. The third article, "An Overview of Choice Programs across the U.S.," is drawn from "Survey of State Initiatives: Public School Choice," published by the Education Commission of the States. Five types of choice plans have been identified: (1) interdistrict choice plans; (2) intradistrict plans; (3) second-chance plans of alternatives for students who have been unsuccessful; (4) postsecondary enrollment options for secondary students; and (5) magnet and state-supported programs for special approaches. The data in these three articles are designed to inform the debate about public choice of schools. Four figures are included. (SLD)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Although Gallup Polls show increasing national interest in allowing parents to choose the public school at which their children will be educated, the possible advantages and disadvantages are being vigorously debated.

Some think choice programs will be downright detrimental:

"I think (choice is) a threat to the security of our nation. It isn't going to educate the children that need it most. It's going to educate a few, possibly, but leave the rest uneducated."

Representative Augustus F. Hawkins, California

Some think they are an absolute necessity:

"Before there can be change, there has to be choice."

Former Delaware Governor Pierre S. du Pont IV

Others fear that choice, while itself beneficial, will substitute for other needed efforts:

"I think choice is a wonderful idea, but I get upset when I see our nation's leaders acting as if choice will solve all the problems."

Owen B. Butler, Chair, Board of Trustees, Committee for Economic Development

As the debate continues, so does action provoked by the issue of choice. Solid information to inform this debate and guide the action is scarce. In this issue, we evaluate a long-standing choice program in Montclair, New Jersey, summarize the major research findings related to different approaches to choice, and characterize the diversity of choice initiatives in the nation.

Montclair — A Model Magnet

Montclair, New Jersey, an urban school district, has used the concept of educational choice to successfully desegregate its schools. The district's voluntary magnet school plan has also helped enhance and diversify educational programs and improve student achievement.

The success of Montclair's magnet system can be assessed on the basis of three important criteria — achieving racial balance across schools, improving students' educational performance, and diversifying students' educational experiences.

The System

The Montclair community, located 12 miles from New York City, is primarily residential, and

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most of its working population commutes to New York or Newark. The district attracts both minority and nonminority families who want the amenities of the suburbs close to the cultural attractions and population diversity of a city.

Until recently, housing patterns in Montclair have been relatively segregated, causing racial imbalance in neighborhood school enrollments. A magnet school system adopted in 1976 to address this racial imbalance gradually evolved from a few magnets to a system that turned the district's six elementary schools and two middle schools into magnet schools.

Montclair is the only school system in New Jersey in which all schools are magnets. The district offers schools for the gifted and talented, for those who wish to concentrate on fundamentals (basic skills), for those interested in international studies, and for those fascinated by science and technology. All schools, however, have a core curriculum that is consistent across grade levels.

Montclair's system is voluntary, allowing parents and students to select a school, and more than 95 percent get their first choice. As long as racial balance is maintained and the school is not over-enrolled, a child is assigned to the school chosen. The district provides transportation for all students. More than half the elementary students are bused to school, indicating that many parents are choosing schools outside their neighborhoods.

Racial Balance

The district has achieved racial balance among its schools since the establishment of the magnet system, as shown in Figure 1. The range of minority enrollment is now between 46 and 52 percent in all schools. The district also monitors enrollments carefully to assure racial and gender balance at the classroom level.

This balance has not been achieved in honors and advanced classes, where minority students are underrepresented, especially at the middle and high school levels. District officials are trying to address this problem through special programs to identify underachieving students.

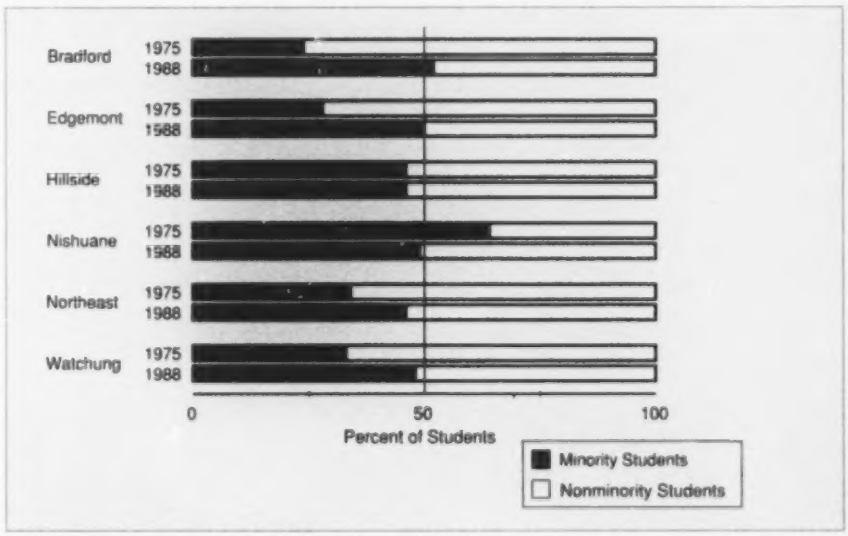
Montclair's staff is also racially diverse — nearly a third of teachers, supervisors, and administrators are members of minority groups. Teachers appear at ease with each other and work together well. They also report feeling at ease with racially mixed groups of students, although some find it difficult to work with students from different cultural and educational backgrounds.

Students of different races also mix well, both in and out of the classroom. While ETS researchers observed all-White and all-Black student groups in the secondary schools, they observed interracial groups as well. The magnet schools are believed to have contributed to interracial friendships. The district actively promotes cultural understanding.

Educational Quality

Standardized test results indicate that academic performance has improved since implementation of the magnet plan (Figures 2 and 3). Although many factors may have contributed to the improvement, these data indicate that the magnet system has not caused test scores to decline and may have been a factor in the

Figure 1
Racial Composition of Montclair's Elementary Schools, 1975 and 1988



Source: Montclair Department of Research, Planning, and Evaluation
Report of Enrollment Figures, September 1986 and October 1988

improvement. The data do, however, show differences in performance between minority and nonminority students. The district has been making special efforts to increase performance of students who lack basic skills.

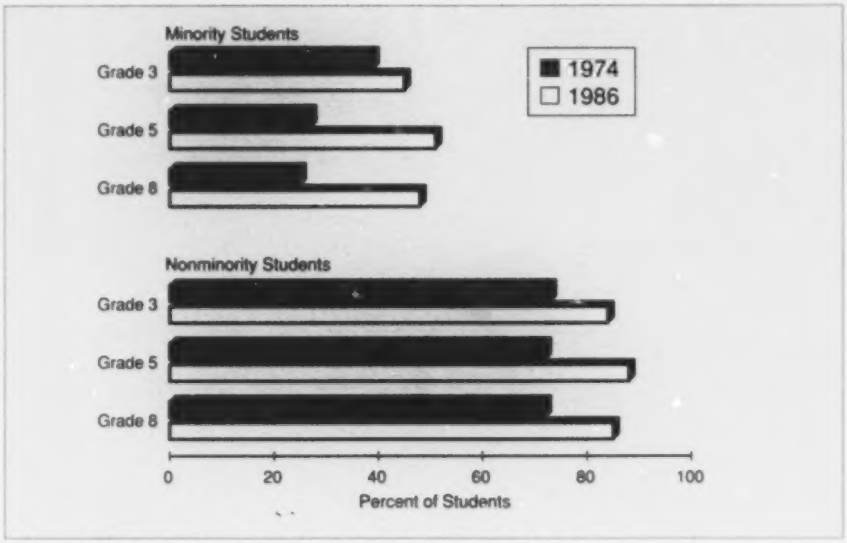
The climate in the schools is favorable to learning. Most schools take a firm but not rigid stance toward discipline, and behavior problems are minimal. Principals are held accountable for school performance and clearly set the tone for the climate in their schools. ETS researchers found that, in most schools, teachers are satisfied with the leadership, working environment, and quality of education provided and support the magnet system and its goals. Generally, students express satisfaction with their schools, their teachers, and what they are learning.

Ongoing curriculum review and careful program monitoring help assure the effectiveness and attractiveness of the magnet schools. In 1985, in a comprehensive review and revision process that involved school board members, central office staff, school staff, and parents, the curriculum was standardized across schools, and grade-level objectives were set for all subjects.

Program Diversity

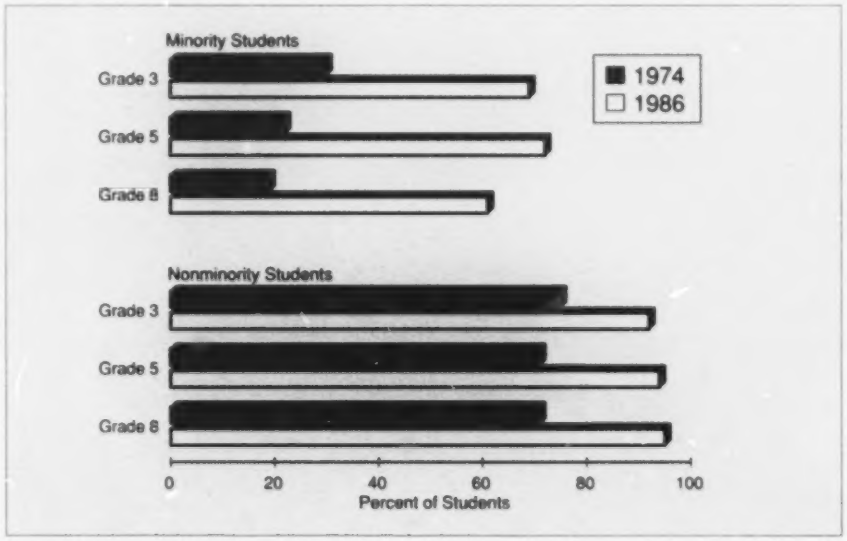
The first magnet schools were a fundamental school and two schools for gifted and talented students. The gifted and talented schools have no admission requirements and are based on the philosophy that all children are gifted and talented in some area. The more academically talented students are provided with special

Figure 2
Percent of Montclair Students Scoring at or above Grade Level in Reading, 1974 and 1986



Source: Montclair Public Schools, Department of Research, Planning, and Evaluation

Figure 3
Percent of Montclair Students Scoring at or above Grade Level in Mathematics, 1974 and 1986



Source: Montclair Public Schools, Department of Research, Planning, and Evaluation

advanced courses, and other students are offered courses in their areas of special talent. The first fundamental magnet school offers a Junior Great Books Program, and another fundamental magnet school provides a basic arts program affiliated with Lincoln Center. The other elementary schools include an international magnet with an emphasis on foreign languages, and a science and technology magnet concentrating on environmental sciences. The most recent addition is a Montessori program housed within one of the fundamental schools.

At the middle school level, the major difference between the schools is style. One provides a structured program emphasizing fundamentals; the other offers a program for gifted and talented students.

Teachers and parents alike cited the diversity of programs as a major attraction of the Montclair school system. Parents feel that the variety of schools allows them to choose one appropriate for the needs of their child.

Lessons Learned

While the Montclair system embodies many of the factors that research has shown to be associated with magnet school success in achieving desegregation, a combination of fortuitous circumstances and informed, intelligent choices predisposed it to succeed. The following factors were present at various stages of the development and implementation of Montclair's magnet plan.

Planning

- Careful planning to ensure optimal program selection and placement
- Strong and intelligent leadership to map the strategy for achieving implementation
- Community involvement to strengthen support for the plan.

Initial Implementation

- Gradual introduction of magnets
- Elimination of all attendance zones
- Strategic placement of programs
- Guaranteed transportation to all programs
- Ensuring the attractiveness of all programs and buildings
- Fostering continued parent involvement
- Strategic placement of staff
- Effective leadership.

Continued Implementation

- Ongoing monitoring of enrollment patterns and programs
- Refinement of programs as needed
- Continued emphasis on encouraging parent involvement
- Evaluation
- Effective leadership.

Clearly, the actions above will not be feasible in all districts, depending on demographic and other characteristics. For example, elimination of attendance zones would be more difficult in a larger system. Other elements, however, such as community involvement and support, can be components of magnet plans in any district, no matter how different from Montclair.

The Montclair experience provides a concrete example of a magnet plan that has been effective in meeting diverse educational goals over a period of time. Although no single choice model is best for all types of communities, much can be learned from successful models like Montclair.

This article is based on an evaluation of Montclair's magnet plan that was conducted in 1987 and updated in 1989 by Beatriz C. Clewell and Myra F. Joy. Their principal findings are reported in *Choice in Montclair, New Jersey*, a policy information paper available for $5, prepaid, from the ETS Policy Information Center, 04-R, Rosedale Road, Princeton, NJ 08541.

What the Research Says

While several theoretical models of public school choice exist, only a few have been implemented, and even fewer have been evaluated. Three types of public school choice programs — regulated voucher systems, alternative schools, and magnet plans — have been the subject of most research to date.

The Alum Rock Union Elementary School District in San Jose, California, is probably the most notable example of a *voucher system*. In this experiment, parents were given vouchers that they used to select any public school in the district.

In other districts *alternative schools* have been created as options to traditional neighborhood schools. In a choice system, the schools are available to all students. By providing different learning approaches and programs, these schools appeal to a wide variety of students.

Magnet programs or schools were originally developed as an alternative to forced busing in large urban school districts and have often been implemented as a result of a court order (or a threat of one) to desegregate schools. Magnet programs promise to bring about desegregation by providing a choice of educational settings and programs and by attracting students of all racial groups to distinctive, high-quality courses not available in neighborhood schools.

Three objectives for public school choice programs — increasing the quality of education, achieving racial balance, and providing diversity in educational programs — can be used to evaluate the success of these plans.

Improving Education Quality

The Alum Rock experiment produced practically no conclusive results regarding the operation of a public school voucher system. Researchers found no differences in academic performance between participants and the rest of the student population.

Researchers did find greater academic achievement among alternative school and magnet school students than among students in traditional schools. Additionally, magnet schools have had higher student attendance rates, fewer behavior problems, and lower suspension and dropout rates than comparable non-magnet schools. Researchers point out, however, that few systematic analyses have considered the effect of self-selection; there is some evidence that more able students attend magnets.

Achieving Racial Balance

Of the three plans, magnets have been most successful in achieving racial balance and desegregation goals. In Alum Rock, the schools' racial balance was slightly better after the experiment. In general, the alternative schools studied were as racially balanced as the regular schools (although there was some evidence of stratification along class lines within individual alternative schools).

Providing Educational Diversity

All three of these choice programs provided diversity. Alum Rock's programs were as varied as those of any of the alternative or magnet schools studied. In a survey of alternative schools, most pointed to a specific teaching method or specialization in a particular subject area as their distinguishing features. Similarly, several evaluations of magnets have cited strong program identity as a factor in their educational appeal.

The body of research suggests that, of the three types of choice programs discussed, magnet plans appear the most promising in meeting the educational goals of providing quality education, racial balance, and diversity of educational program offerings.

This article is drawn from *Choice in Montclair, New Jersey* by Beatriz C. Clewell and Myra F. Joy. Information on how to order this publication can be found at the end of "Montclair — A Model Magnet" in this issue.

An Overview of Choice Programs Across the U.S.

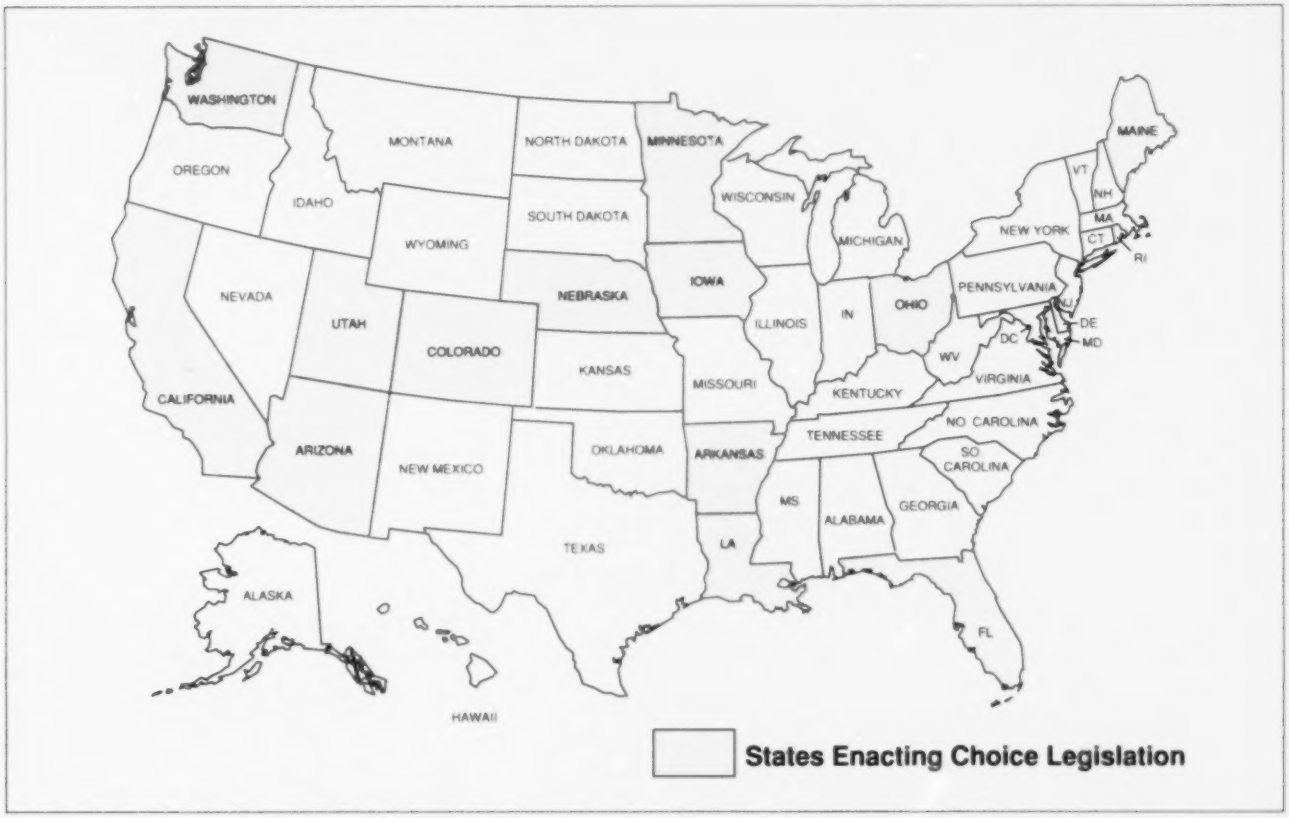
How diversified have the formats of choice programs offered in the public schools become? The Education Commission of the States (ECS), in a state survey conducted in 1989, identified five types.

- Interdistrict choice plans allow students and parents to choose schools located outside their home district.
- Intradistrict plans limit choices to schools within the student's home district.
- Second-chance plans provide alternative programs for students who have not been successful in traditional settings.
- Postsecondary enrollment options allow high school students to take courses at colleges and universities for high school credit, college credit, or both.
- Magnet and state-supported schools offer programs with a special focus or approach, sometimes in a residential setting.

Thirteen states have recently passed legislation authorizing some types of choice, either statewide or optional (see Figure 4). Postsecondary option programs were legislated in eight states; interdistrict plans in six; intradistrict plans in three; and second-chance plans in two.

Legislation relating to intradistrict or interdistrict plans is pending in another five states — California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Oklahoma. Legislation has failed, at least for now, in eight

Figure 4
13 States Have Recently Passed "Choice" Legislation



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states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, Utah, and Wisconsin. Virtually all of the rejected legislation dealt with intradistrict or interdistrict choice. Finally, New Jersey has established a pilot program on choice that includes intradistrict, postsecondary options, and second chance programs.

These plans differ widely in their scope, style, and goals. The following examples have been drawn from the ECS survey and a forthcoming ETS Policy Information Center publication on state education standards in 1990.

Interdistrict Plans

Arkansas is one of a handful of states to adopt a statewide interdistrict choice program. The Public School Choice Act of 1989 is illustrative of the issues that these plans address. The law allows students to attend the public school of their choice in any district in the state, providing the transfer does not adversely affect the racial balance of either the sending or receiving district. District participation is voluntary. The district enrolling the students receives state aid, and students who transfer are ineligible for interscholastic sports for one year. Parents are responsible for transporting the student to the nearest border of the receiving district; the receiving district provides transportation to the school at the parents' request. California, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Ohio also have some type of interdistrict choice program.

Intradistrict Plans

Ohio legislation requires all school districts to enact by 1993 policies that allow students to attend any school within their home district. Iowa and Minnesota already have such programs. Most intradistrict plans, however, are local; the state role is usually facilitative. Cambridge, Massachusetts, has an intradistrict program aimed at two interrelated purposes common to such plans — achieving voluntary desegregation and empowering school staff to improve education quality. Other examples of intradistrict plans include Community District 4 in New York City and the Chicago school system.

Second-Chance Plans

In Colorado, unsuccessful high school students can attend a Second-Chance Center in their own district or in another one, if they are accepted by that district. Minnesota's High School Graduation Incentives and Diploma Opportunities for Adults programs allow at-risk students and dropouts to complete high school through various options, including publicly funded alternative programs and area learning centers. General revenue funds are paid to districts enrolling school-age students, and special funds are available for students over age 21.

Postsecondary Options

Several states have established programs that allow high school students to take college courses. Colorado's Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act, passed in 1988, is illustrative of this type of choice program. The program permits eleventh- and twelfth-grade students to enroll in college or university courses and attend college full-time. The student's home school district decides whether the courses apply toward high school graduation, and the college or university decides whether the student receives college-level credit. The state pays the student's tuition and continues to pay the student's portion of state aid to the school district. Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, Louisiana, Maine, Utah, and Washington also have postsecondary options programs.

Magnet and State-Supported Schools

New York State's magnet school/choice program provides funding for 12 districts to develop and implement innovative programs to attract students. Several of the state's urban districts have extensive magnet systems, including Buffalo, Rochester, and Yonkers. Mississippi and North Carolina support special residential math and science schools for high school juniors and seniors.

Survey of State Initiatives: Public School Choice (SI-89-2) is available for $8.50 from the ECS Distribution Center, Suite 300, 1860 Lincoln Street, Denver, CO 80295. A companion to the survey, *A State Policy Maker's Guide to Public School Choice* (SI-89-1), reviews the major types of choice plans and educates policymakers about the pros and cons of the plans, the issues they should consider, and the questions they should ask. This publication is also available from ECS for $11.

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